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# A PARTICULAR KIND OF JOURNALISM

HENRY ROBINSON LUCE, the cofounder of TIME, probably had less personal publicity than any other American of comparable influence; he was widely unknown, and what was known about him was often wrong. Luce was particularly nettled by Wolcott Gibbs' brilliant parody profile in *The New Yorker* ("Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind"). Once, after Luce had visited a college class in contemporary biography, he exploded: "And who do you suppose the class was discussing? Me! And what do you suppose they were using as their text? That goddam article in *The New Yorker*! Is this thing going to be engraved on my tombstone?"

Perhaps to provide a better "text" about himself, but also to contribute a chapter to the history of American journalism, Luce commissioned a history of Time Inc. In 1964, three years before he died, he charged the author "to be candid, truthful, and to suppress nothing relevant or essential to the narrative." The result is *TIME INC. The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, 1923-1941* (Atheneum; \$10). Can the account of a company be intimate? It seems like a contradiction in terms, but readers may decide that this book is indeed reasonably intimate.

The writer is Robert T. Elson, for 25 years a correspondent and editor for TIME, *FORTUNE* and *LIFE*, who has had access to all company archives and to the memories of almost all of the people involved. What emerges is in part a portrait of Luce's working life, with a few reflections of his private life. More than that, what emerges is the art, craft and business of a particular kind of journalism. Elson opens his account at a point when TIME was a brash, almost absurdly ambitious experiment. He closes it when the magazine, now the eldest in a family that included *FORTUNE*, *LIFE*, *The March of Time* and other enterprises, had become important enough to earn a public rebuke from the President of the U.S.—and to offer him, shortly thereafter, its rather solemn support in war. The second volume will carry the story up to the 1960s.

*Currents of the Times*. Elson constantly describes the play of ideas that took place among the principals, often in office memoranda. Luce and his associates wrote a great many of these—indeed it seems remarkable that they had any time left over to get out the magazines. In these memos they struggled with each other, tried to convince each other, often about procedural matters (Who is responsible for accuracy?) but, more often, about the main political and intellectual currents of the times.

Elson's book points up the interesting origins of the two founders. Henry Luce: son of a devout Presbyterian missionary, born in China, his fondest memories of Fourth of July celebrations when the Americans clasped hands in the "hush of eventide" and sang *My Country, 'Tis of Thee*. He never could forget "a shameful, futile, endless two hours one Saturday afternoon when I rolled around the unspeakably dirty floor of the main schoolroom with a little British bastard who had insulted my country." Such experiences, he later felt, gave him a "too romantic, too idealistic view of America . . . I had no experience of evil in terms of Americans."

Briton Hadden: born in Brooklyn to a prosperous banking family, wanted to become a professional baseball player but wasn't that good; mischievous, mercurial and iconoclastic. After they met, and competed, at both Hotchkiss and Yale, they performed the extraordinary feat of raising \$85,675 to launch their

orig. P. Luce, Henry

Luce P. Elson, Robert T.

Soc. H. O. L. & T. H.

Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise



HENRY LUCE BY EDWARD STEICHEN (1935)

magazine. It was Hadden who developed TIME style, in its early incarnation an extraordinary idiom, at once economical, vivid, infuriating and occasionally poetic. While Luce managed the business end, Hadden edited, with a carefully annotated translation of Homer's *Iliad* by his side; in the back cover he had listed hundreds of its energetic verbs and compound adjectives—fore-runners of TIME's "beetle-browed," "buzzard-bald," etc. He also encouraged backward-running sentences ("A ghastly ghouel prowled around a cemetery not far from Paris. Into family chapels went he, robbery of the dead intent upon"). When Hadden, only 31, died of a streptococcus infection in 1929, the magazine published a Milestones item about him which ended in a typical TIME sentence: "To Briton Hadden success came steadily, satisfaction never."

Under Hadden's rule, TIME had been extraordinarily carefree and sometimes irresponsible—a state of affairs, writes Elson, which "present-day TIME editors and writers can envy." Hadden delighted in journalistic pranks. He peopled the Letters column with invented characters, most notably the puritanical lady who kept objecting to the Prince of Wales' loose living, inciting other letter writers to object to her narrow views. Since readers have sometimes discerned in TIME a special mixture of seriousness (not to say portentousness) and levity, it was easily assumed that the first

quality stemmed from Luce and the second from Hadden. As Elson shows, that explanation is too simple. Luce had his share of irreverence, which he encouraged or at least permitted in his magazines; Hadden, on the other hand, was deeply serious beneath his frivolous exterior. They were both earnest about the need to inform America.

When TIME was already a fairly important magazine, Luce did not consider it beneath his dignity to appear at a businessmen's lunch and stage a quiz game to demonstrate the importance of accurate information. Later he was to write that the "invention" involved in TIME lay not in its brevity or in its principle of organizing the news but in its emphasis on the "instructive role of journalism." Still later, in early 1939, when he was displeased with the magazine, he complained: "Somehow it does not give the feel of being desperately, whimsically, absurdly, cockeyedly, wholeheartedly determined to inform, to in-



BRITON HADDEN (1928)